HONOLULU HIGH CAPACITY TRANSIT CORRIDOR PROJECT – DEIS BACKGROUND AND STATUS

Project/DEIS Background

The Honolulu High Capacity Transit Corridor Project is a being developed to provide high capacity rapid transit in the congested corridor on the island of Oahu between Kapolei in the west and the University of Hawaii-Manoa and Waikiki to the east. The project corridor is approximately 23 miles long and contains the majority of the population and employment on the island of Oahu.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) discussed ~~as~~ 34 miles of potential guideway located within the corridor, but the detailed analysis discusses the core 19-20 mile segment planned for implementation under the current proposal.

The Alternative Analysis evaluated a No Build Alternative, a Transportation System Management Alternative, Managed Lane Alternatives, and Fixed Guideway Alternatives. Only the Fixed Guideway alternatives were determined to sufficiently address the purpose and need for the project and was selected as the Locally Preferred Alternative and advanced to the DEIS stage.

A technical review panel evaluated proposals and voted four to one to select steel wheel on steel rail technology, a decision accepted by the City Government. An elevated system was also proposed as the only alternative that provides sufficient user benefits.

The DEIS also proposed a phasing of the project along the following schedule:

- East Kapolei to Pearl Highlands
- Pearl Highlands to Aloha Stadium
- Aloha Stadium to Middle Street
- Middle Street to Ala Monoa Center

A point of discussion has been that the proposed project phasing would be built from west to east, or from the relatively undeveloped and unpopulated section of the corridor to the more populated areas to the east that contains the bulk of the origins and destinations.

When the DEIS was released for public comment in November 2008, the Locally Preferred Alternative was the Salt Lake Alignment. On January 28, 2009 the Honolulu City Council, with the agreement of Mayor Hannemann, voted to change the Locally Preferred Alternative to the Airport Alignment. How the project phasing would be conducted under the new Preferred Alternative is unknown.

Status of the DEIS

The DEIS was released in November 2008, and after an extension of the public comment period, public comment was closed during the first week in February. Over 600 commenter's with 3200 individual comments were received. Staff from the City of Honolulu Rapid Transit Division (RTD) responding to the comments received. Region IX staff also participated in coordination meetings with the National Park Service (NPS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Status of the FEIS

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FTA received an Administrative Draft FEIS (AFEIS) in October 2009 for review and comment. Based upon public comments and agency concerns, the AFEIS included a number changes from the DEIS. Changes included: a beefed-up alternatives analysis section; the development of least harm alternatives for Section 4(f) resources and revision of the 4(f) narrative; improved noise evaluation and mitigation and clarification of significant visual impacts.

The Section 106/4(f) Process

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Completion of the process to develop a Section 106 Programmatic Agreement (PA) is in its final stages. There were a dozen active participants including: the U.S. Navy, the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the NPS, the Oahu Island Burial Council, the ACHP and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Major issues were visual effects, indirect and cumulative effects around proposed station areas and effects on unknown Native Hawaiian burials and cultural resources. FTA, ACHP and the SHPO are putting the finishing touches on the Draft Final 106 PA. A proposed station touchdown on a Navy historic district is a last minute issue. The Navy is very supportive in coming to closure on the touchdown issue, but we will need SHPO concurrence on a no adverse effects determination for quick resolution.

The Airport Alignment Issue

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At the 11th hour, FFA has become involved in the project as a cooperating agency since the alignment affects the Honolulu International Airport directly. FTA requested during scoping that FAA become cooperating agency. Both FAA and Hawaii DOT (Airports Division) are concerned with the current alignments impact on two north/south runways. The development of a proposed air cargo access zone could be curtailed and the runways may have to be moved. FAA is looking for proposed alternative alignments and HTS has demonstrated reluctance to provide more information to both FAA and FTA on alignment alternatives.

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On January 7th, Senator Inouye's staff became involved and is requesting a quick resolution to this issue. FAA Acting Associate Administrator Kate Lang will be in Honolulu this week and will meet with local Director Ron Simpson. A meeting in Los Angeles was held in January 13 between staff of RTD, FTA and FAA to discuss alignment alternatives, impacts and mitigation.

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Financial Issues/Potential Project Changes

The change in the Locally Preferred Alternative from the Salt Lake Alignment to the Airport Alignment increases the projects costs, potentially 200 million dollars or more. Combined with a financial plan that was already operating on a razor thin margin between costs and revenues and a damaged national and local economy, it is highly uncertain if the project can proceed as proposed. FTA has repeatedly advised Honolulu City and RTD staff and their consultants that if a financial shortfalls result in major changes to the project, it may be necessary to significantly revise and possibly release the revised environmental document for public comment, with resulting delays to the project.

Proposed EIS Schedule

FTA has largely completed its review and comment of the AFEIS. Minor changes related to the Airport Alignment, and 106 and 4(f) resources will have to be included in the final document including a signed 106 PA. RTD's continued requirement for immediate NEPA closure seems to have prevented it from doing the further work necessary to gain NEPA closure.